A greater role for culture in the EU external relations

In recent years, calls for a more strategic approach to culture in the EU relations with third countries and regions have multiplied, emanating from different stakeholders (European Parliament, Member States, cultural institutes, civil society). Building on this momentum and in line with the Council Work Plan for Culture 2011-2014, in March 2012 the European Commission convened a group of Member States’ experts to reflect on a common EU strategy to cultural relations with third countries.

An innovative pilot initiative

This was an innovative pilot initiative. For the first time, representatives of Ministries of Culture and Ministries of Foreign Affairs from the EU Member States were brought together to work side by side in order to develop a strategic vision on the role of culture in the EU external relations. The group was also a “joint venture” between the European Commission and the European External Action Service, which co-chaired all its meetings.

China as a test case

Considering its importance as a strategic partner for the Member States individually and for the EU as a whole, it was jointly decided with Member States that the group would focus its reflections on China as a test case. The intention was to propose a strategic vision for the future of EU-China cultural relations in the context of an evolving EU-China strategic partnership, which was enhanced with the establishment of the High-Level People-to-People Dialogue in 2012.

Seeking added value for greater impact

The expert group worked on identifying the areas where the added value of initiatives and cooperation at EU level can contribute to supporting or complementing Member States’ initiatives.

Member States’ bilateral cultural relations with China feature a variety of activities and actors, which reflect the diversity and richness of EU cultures. While these bilateral activities are and will remain fundamental, the group confirmed the need for closer cooperation among Member States within a broader EU perspective as this can generate stronger impact.
Seeking synergies and pooling individual initiatives can help achieve a greater scale and critical mass of activities. Economies of scale will also allow doing more within the current financial constraints. Projecting a more coherent image of the EU in China can improve the way the EU cultural potential and the richness of its diversity is perceived by the Chinese public, thereby strengthening the EU image and the values it embodies.

Strengthening information sharing and networking among Member States and European cultural stakeholders can help better identify common interests and challenges, as well as mobilise appropriate expertise more effectively. This can further help develop a more conducive environment for EU-China cultural exchanges and cooperation.

**A flexible and open approach**

The group noted that mutual interests and opportunities can potentially arise in all cultural and creative sectors and therefore encouraged a flexible and open approach to the development of EU-China cultural relations. Special emphasis was placed on the need for both sides to support the development of professional skills and build capacity in the cultural and creative sectors through training, peer-learning, the exchange of best practices and networking.

**Beyond China: general principles for cultural cooperation**

While the work of the expert group was focused on China, it has also contributed more broadly to the general reflections on the role of culture in the EU external relations. In this perspective, the group identified a series of general principles for cultural cooperation which, with the necessary adaptations, may apply more broadly to other partner countries or regions as well.

**A broad, articulated vision of culture**

According to the group, a strategic approach to culture in the context of the EU external action should be based on a broad, articulated vision of culture in all its facets as a social, economic and political asset for the EU and its Member States, which can contribute to creating a more effective environment for diplomacy and foreign relations. It should also be based on the principles of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

**Sharing values through concrete action**

The group underlined that universal values to which the EU attaches utmost importance are best demonstrated in action rather than only in statement. Cultural cooperation can contribute to sharing these values by creating the adequate space to communicate them convincingly through concrete action.

**Respecting the autonomy of the cultural sector**

The expert group underlined the importance of respecting the autonomy of the cultural sector and of prioritizing bottom-up approaches. Direct and sustainable cooperation among cultural professionals and organisations can create the space where the most effective and fruitful actions can take shape.
A long-term two-way process
The group also insisted on the importance of conceiving cultural cooperation with partner countries as long-term, two-way processes aimed at enhancing mutual understanding, building trust over time, and seeking mutual benefits. Engaging in this process requires a long-term vision not limited to one-off initiatives but built on activities which can serve as catalysts for lasting cooperation.

A multi-level approach
The need to adopt a multi-level approach was also underlined in order to take into account the broader regional context within which cultural cooperation develops as well as different levels of governance.

Building on existing experience
The group acknowledged the importance of building on the available existing experience, structures and contacts developed by cultural operators and institutes on the ground.

A shared responsibility
Delivering added value through increased cooperation at EU level is a shared responsibility of all actors concerned: EU institutions, Member States, civil society.

In the short-term, it is important to identify and better exploit the existing resources, structures and tools, including the currently available EU instruments, as well as to enhance the European dimension of existing bilateral initiatives. Special attention needs to be devoted to exploiting the potential of virtual tools, in particular to reach out to the young generations.

In the medium to long-term, diversified solutions will have to be identified including by exploring the opportunities that may arise in the context of relevant future EU instruments, devising new approaches leading to increased cooperation and pooling of resources among Member States, attracting private funding, developing partnerships with the other side, etc.